

Local lawmakers say education is top priority this session

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(AP Photo/Ted S. Warren)

Arborists work to replace cables and braces holding up a large tree on the capitol campus Thursday, Jan. 7, 2016, in Olympia, Wash. The 2016 regular session of the Washington Legislature begins on Monday, Jan. 11, 2016.

Fire, water and public education are among the top priorities for lawmakers representing Kittitas County in the state Legislature this year.

The 105-day session starts today. Last week, state Sen. Judy Warnick, and Reps. Matt Manweller of Ellensburg and Tom Dent of Moses Lake took a few minutes to preview the session ahead. The 13th District takes in Kittitas and Lincoln counties, most of Grant County and the northern portion of Yakima County.

Education

Sen. Judy Warnick, R-Moses Lake, said her primary purpose this session is to fully fund public education in accordance with a state Supreme Court ruling.

"I know we can do it," she said. "We just have to set our minds to it."

She said it will be a challenge to find funding, and some options include new taxes or cutting programs in other areas, but she hopes a sustainable solution will be found. The

Legislature is looking at local school districts and asking how much of levies are going for operations or salaries, to better understand the picture and get it balanced out.

"I want to find — and I think the public wants, and especially anybody in education — a sustainable source of revenue for education and that is a challenge because any revenue we have coming in now is pretty much allocated to other programs," she said.

The Legislature has been fined \$100,000 a day since last fall for failing to fund public schools adequately.

"For the state, we have to solve the education issue," said Rep. Tom Dent, R-Moses Lake.

Rep. Matt Manweller, R-Ellensburg, isn't sure there are enough votes for levy reform to pass.

Manweller said that instead of local communities passing levies, there would essentially be a statewide levy that would be equally distributed.

"What we would do is all the levy money would go in one kind of pot," he said, adding that it is revenue neutral. "Why is it that Mercer Island gets more money than Kittitas?"

Manweller said that in general, liberal lawmakers oppose this idea.

Manweller also said the state needs to fix the charter school system.

The Washington State Supreme Court declared the state's voter-approved law establishing charter schools was unconstitutional.

"We've got to somehow get around that silly Supreme Court decision," he said.

School shootings

Manweller is also pushing to prevent school shootings.

He is working with Rep. Kevin Parker, R-Spokane, to introduce a bill that would present a way for students to anonymously report threats before a shooting happens.

"When we have a school shooting, the student posts the night before," Manweller said. "The kids know about it, but the adults don't."

The bill is modeled after Colorado legislation that was adopted after the Columbine High School massacre.

Parker was a student at Columbine the day of the shooting, Manweller said.

Fire

Warnick serves as the chairwoman of the Senate Agricultural, Water and Rural Economic Development Committee. She also serves on the Natural Resources and Parks Committee, which will spend quite a bit of time looking at what can be done to help with wildfire situations going into the future, she said.

“We can throw money at it, but we need to be changing some of the ways we do things,” Warnick said. “I also know we’re going to have to fund the fires that we’ve had in the past.”

Some of the areas that will be looked at include funding for the forest maintenance programs to remove overgrowth, increasing grazing leases and training volunteers to help fight fires before the fires happen.

Warnick said she recently met with CWU’s Director of Government Relations, Ann Anderson, about Central’s proposed fire mapping training, and certificate and degree program, which could help with the training aspect.

This year is a supplemental budget and the Senate has already been told there will be no new capital projects funded, Warnick said, adding that perhaps some of the operational funds could be used for some of Central’s proposed programs.

“There may be some possibility of getting funds for those specific programs, especially when it comes to the firefighting effort,” Warnick said. “I’m very supportive of that.”

Dent also has been involved in wildfire issues as a member of a legislative wildfire caucus, and has supported efforts to allow volunteers to help fight wildfires in the state.

Water

Another issue lawmakers face is the water issues on both sides of the state.

Dent said lawmakers need to work on flooding on the West Side, address statewide droughts and work on the Yakima integrated water management plan.

“These are things that are on the table that we’ve been working on,” he said. “(We have to) start coming to some kind of agreement on how we can solve some of these problems.”

Manweller has been appointed to the House Washington Waters Task Force, a task force that has been looking at storm water, flood control and water supply infrastructure.

He said they are working to find and fund water storage solutions in the Yakima River basin and the Odessa aquifer region.

Warnick is pushing a water bill, similar to the one in Kittitas County, which would help about 375 Skagit Valley residents obtain legal methods for retaining their water.

Ag taxes

Dent said he is working on bills that would help farmers who are purchasing agriculture equipment.

One bill would allow people who purchase high-value agriculture equipment to spend up to three years to pay sales tax.

This would apply to sprayer aircraft, which he said can cost around \$1 million.

By extending the time people had to pay the taxes, he said it should encourage more people to buy that kind of equipment.

Dent is also calling for tax breaks for people who need their farm equipment serviced.

Under another bill, farmers would no longer pay sales tax if they needed their equipment serviced or repaired.

He is also calling reform on auction taxes.

Dent said under current law, if farm equipment is sold at a farm auction, there is no sales tax.

However, if the equipment is auctioned from an auctioneer's property, then sales tax applies.

"It doesn't make sense to me," he said. "It has been somewhat of a bookkeeping nightmare for auction companies."

Another bill would take the penalty charged for not paying the excise charge on aircraft and put it into the aeronautical fund instead of the general fund, he said.

Other bills

Some other bills Warnick will be working on include a bill to make changes in plumbing codes that would better marry state and federal regulations.

She'll again try to boost rural economic development by making changes to the Community Economic Revitalization Board. She's been working to pass a bill to take away the provision for the prevailing wage requirement for funding for CERB funds.

Manweller is calling for the Human Rights Commission transgender restroom and locker room rule to be repealed.

In December, the commission ruled that people could use gender-segregated facilities, such as restrooms, locker rooms and dressing rooms, based on their gender identity rather than their sex.

"That means if a man identifies as a woman, he is allowed to use the women's restroom or locker room," he said. "Do parents want boys in the girls locker room at Moses Lake or Ellensburg High School?"